

10 June, 2024

Artforum

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BOOKS

DREAM ON BABY: ARTISTS AND THEIR CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

In an exclusive excerpt from a new book, Wong Ping dishes on childhood memories

By Gesine Borchardt

June 10, 2024 10:25 am



Cover of Gesine Borchardt's *Dream On Baby: Artists and Their Childhood Memories* (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2024).

Childhood never leaves us. For many artists, it was the trigger for making art in the first place and is still what drives them today. For her new book Dream on Baby – Artists and their Childhood Memories (Hatje Cantz, 2024), Gesine Borchardt spoke with thirty-three artists—among them Marina Abramovic, Lynda Benglis, Marcel Dzama, Jeff Koons, Vaginal Davis, and Jordan Wolfson—about the impact of their earliest experiences on being an artist today. In the excerpt that follows, [Wong Ping](#) locates the roots of his absurdist animated videos in his experiences growing up in Hong Kong.

I COME FROM a Hong Kong middle-class family. My father was a cook and then became a restaurant manager. He started his own company but failed badly, so we had to move from a house to a big apartment building. My mother was a housewife. In my family, we didn't have anything related to art or design or music or movies. I think this is very common—my parents are the first generation in their family to grow up in Hong Kong. My grandparents escaped from communist China to Hong Kong when it was still undeveloped. They were selling soda water and Coca-Cola. My father started to work in the restaurant business when he was twelve. They all had to work really hard to make a living and had no chance to develop their interests or hobbies. So, I grew up without any sense of art. But the good thing was that, unlike other Asian parents, mine didn't tell me what I should do with my life, as long as I could pay them. This is a Chinese and Hong Kong tradition: every month we give our parents a certain amount of our salary. Whether you're rich or poor, this is a gesture you have to make.

Also, my parents were pretty strict, especially my mom. I think she had no idea how to raise a kid. She was twenty when she had me. I had to stay inside all the time. If I went to play basketball, she got angry at me. When I woke up in the morning and she was still asleep, I was scared to turn on the TV because this could wake her up. So, I put the sound on low and watched cartoons. Every time she woke up seeing me watching TV, I was in trouble. But what was I supposed to do? I didn't have a computer or any books or comics at home. When other kids were outside, I had to stay put and watch the programs my mom thought I could watch. I don't really know how I survived.

Japanese comics became a big thing for me. In Hong Kong, we have Japanese comic bookstores everywhere, where you can hang out for hours and they provide cheap drinks. Those comics were the only way for me to see the world and other people's mindsets. Some comics are like drama, reflecting human life and its meaning. I enjoy drama. Any topic in life you can find in comics as well. They provided a world for me that later affected my writing for my animations.

When I was in third grade, our teacher played us lots of music videos and experimental videos. That was the first time I saw what was possible. I didn't have any feeling for creating at all, but it was a trend to study design and 3D animation and motion graphics. Today, people are editing with their phones, but back in the day it was a privilege to learn Photoshop. When I was fifteen I failed my exams, and as my parents felt they couldn't take care of me, they sent me to Australia where they had a friend. So, I went there and studied English and managed to go to university. I picked a course on multimedia design where they didn't request any exam results but only an assignment. That's how I got into using Photoshop, designing logos, and using 3D software.

Before I went to Australia, I was a very loud kid. But in Australia I was scared to speak because of the language barrier. I just stayed at home on the internet, read comics, and watched Japanese cartoons. I became really introverted, and I have been like this ever since. Later on, when I went into art and creating, I found my old self in my work—how I say things, how my sense of humor comes out.

When I came back to Hong Kong from Australia at twenty-one, most of the software that I had learned there had become outdated. I found no job and got really frustrated. Then I got a job in a local broadcast station that needed cheap labor. There, I had the chance to learn new software and adapt it to my animation skills. I guess it was this broadcast station job that got me into wanting to create. It was like a jail because TV is twenty-four hours, and the postproduction I had to do was so boring. I was erasing pimples from actor's faces and making gunshot scenes with fake bullets, smoke, and fire. One time, a director asked me to turn a scene they shot in summer into winter. That was really stupid. I was like a machine. I didn't have to think. So, I started to create stories in my mind. Somehow, this became my hobby, and I put these short stories into a blog after I came home from work. That's how it all came about, and when I was working with illustration software in my next job, the stories became illustrations and animations. I posted them on social media and, at some point, people from the music industry and from the art world approached me. Most of my animations are about social issues. And they are weird because they are not animated properly. I enjoy that. And I am too lazy to improve.



Wong Ping, Vienna, 2023. Photo: kunst-dokumentation.com.



Wong Ping, *Sorry for the late reply*, 2021, HD video, color, sound, 15 minutes.

I think that I don't have any interests. Even now, being an artist is not my goal. I just accidentally fell into that, and I am not sure about it. It's pretty bad to live without a sense of purpose. I am not a depressed or sad person. I am happy to be alive. To me, making art is the same as my day job, when I go home to write and make my videos and then go back to work. It feels a bit like a hobby. I am struggling to find enjoyment and excitement on a daily basis. My writing comes through wandering around the city and simply staying awake—that sucks, as it is not solid.

As I said, I grew up in an environment without any passion or interest in anything. My family didn't even like to celebrate things. We have 365 days a year, and celebrating some particular days might give us some purpose to go forward. I remember when I was twelve or thirteen, I wanted to give my mom a gift. I saw her looking at a special backpack, so I saved a bit of money and bought it and gave it to her for her birthday. She just got angry. She put the backpack away and never used it. This is the first time I felt that I should stay distant from people, so I won't get hurt. That's the distance I have with my relationships or friends. Don't get me wrong, I love my family, but I look up to some friends that know how to throw a party or give gifts. I was learning. Over time I became less emotional but more observant. I also became less accepting of others' good will, and I do not feel comfortable bothering others by asking for help. This is why I make everything in my works

myself—story, animation, voice-over, and subtitles. But I have slowly learned that asking others for help actually allows trust, too. Bothering someone can help the relationship to grow. I have a really good relationship with my family, but they just never taught me how to enjoy love or life. They just didn't know how; nobody else taught me either. I learned to interact—how to have a relationship, how to have sex, etcetera—from TV. My parents did not have media to learn from. For them, it was all about making money. But again, they are very chill in that they never asked me to become a doctor or lawyer or engineer. I grew up without any of that stress. It was just very dull and flat.